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Asbrand, Barbara

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## The meaning of peer culture for learning at school: the example of a student company

**Barbara Asbrand<sup>1</sup>**

### **ABSTRACT**

The empirical research investigates the orientation and learning processes of adolescents concerning global issues in different educational settings. How do adolescents create their knowledge about the world? What worldviews and ideas do adolescents have about global perspectives? How do they deal with the complexity of world society? The qualitative-empirical research focuses on the comparative analysis of learning processes in different educational settings, such as school lessons in different subjects, school-based extra-curricular activities and non-formal youth work outside school. The main topic of the paper is a case study of a group of female students who run World Shop as student company. The objective is to describe a specific learning culture at a gymnasium, a German grammar school, and the learning processes which occur within a certain learning arrangement. In this context, the student company is important both as an extra-curricular project and because issues which occur in its work setting are integrated into different school lessons. The integration of Global Education in school culture results from the presence of the student company in everyday life at school and the combination of informal learning processes within the peer milieu and formal systematic instruction in school lessons. The research reveals the great potential for the desired acquisition of competencies and knowledge. This in turn demonstrates the extent that student learning is encouraged by a particular school and learning culture.

### **KEYWORDS**

Learning; Competencies; School; School culture; Student company

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<sup>1</sup> Professor at Goethe-University Frankfurt am Main. E-mail: [b.asbrand@em.uni-frankfurt.de](mailto:b.asbrand@em.uni-frankfurt.de) – Germany.

## O significado da cultura de pares para a aprendizagem na escola: o exemplo de uma empresa júnior

### **RESUMO**

*A investigação empírica investiga a orientação e o processo de aprendizagem de adolescentes referente a questões globais em diferentes contextos educacionais. Como adolescentes criam seu conhecimento do mundo? Quais as visões de mundo e as ideias que os adolescentes tem a partir da perspectiva global? Como lidam com a complexidade da sociedade mundial? A pesquisa qualitativa-empírica foca na análise comparativa dos processos em diferentes contextos educacionais, tais como momentos em sala de aula de diferentes disciplinas, atividades escolares extra-curriculares e trabalho juvenil não-formal fora da escola. O principal objetivo do texto é um estudo de caso de um grupo de estudantes do sexo feminino que coordenam lojas mundiais na forma de Empresa Júnior. O objetivo é descrever uma cultura de aprendizagem específica num Gymnasium, uma escola de gramática alemã, bem como o processo de aprendizagem que ocorre dentro de um certo arranjo didático-pedagógico. Neste contexto, a empresa júnior é importante tanto como projeto extra escolar, quanto como meio de integração dos assuntos e trabalhos nas diferentes lições ou aulas das diversas disciplinas. A integração da educação global na cultura escolar resulta da presença da empresa júnior no dia a dia da escola e a combinação de processos informais de aprendizagem dentro do grupo de pares e sistemática introdução de lições escolares. A pesquisa revela o grande potencial para a desejada aquisição de competências e conhecimento. Isto por sua vez demonstra a extensão na qual o aprendizado estudantil é encorajado por uma escola e cultura de aprendizagem em particular.*

### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

*Aprendizagem; Competências; Escola; Cultura escolar; Empresa júnior*

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper focuses on the description of a specific learning culture at a gymnasium, a German grammar school, and the learning processes of male and female students which occur within a certain learning arrangement. The focus is specifically on the example of a World Shop, a company that is run by students and teachers and plays an important role in the culture of the particular school.

## **RESEARCH CONTEXT**

The question in this qualitative empirical research project concerned how German adolescents construct global reality, what they think about global issues, and the ways in which they deal with the complexity of world society. For the inquiry, group discussions were held with thirty groups of adolescents from different schools and youth organisations. Participating secondary level students had dealt with issues of global education, either in school lessons (such as in religious education, civic education and foreign languages) or in extra-curricular activities at school, and others were involved in non-school related activities dealing with globalisation and development, e.g. by participating in the work of NGOs or youth organisations.

Group discussions were analysed by means of the documentary method (BOHNSACK, 2007; 2010), based on the sociology of knowledge approach of Mannheim (1964; 1980). During the interpretation of the qualitative data, a typology was developed to explain the different orientations of adolescents according to fundamental experiences called conjunctive experiential spaces, such as social background or gender-specific experiences. The documentary method is based on the assumption that specific orientations, world views or knowledge are framed by fundamental experiences that take place within specific social surroundings or environments. The results of the research project show that the structure of the learning arrangement constitutes specific experiences that shape the learners' orientations and knowledge.

The aim of the research project was to describe the learners' perspectives in the pedagogical processes. Learning arrangements in lessons and in extra-curricular activities, as well as non-school related youth work, are considered to be conjunctive experiential spaces in which pedagogically-intended, fundamental processes of imparting and acquiring knowledge

about the world occur (SCHÄFFER, 2003). The object of interpretation was the adolescents' genesis of knowledge. In this respect, the empirical analysis of the adolescents' orientations towards global issues is connected with an interest in reconstructing young people's learning processes in the areas of Global Education. Thus, the adolescents' shared experiences and orientations (based on the conjunctive fundamental experiences of learning and instruction at school) are expressed, for example, in discourses by students with whom group discussions were held at school. In the framework of the documentary interpretation, connections can be shown between the learning processes and the conditions of learning. Underlying this description of adolescents' learning processes was the assumption that findings about the learners' perspective could be applied successfully to the theory and practice of Global Education.

## GLOBAL EDUCATION

In relation to pedagogical practice, the development of modern society into a world society demands that learners acquire competencies and ethical orientation for the life in a globalised world. One reaction to the challenges of globalisation is the concept of Global Education. According to Scheunpflug e Schröck (2002), Global Education aims at providing the learners with competencies for living in a world society and for shaping the future according to the ideals of sustainability and worldwide justice (SCHEUNPFLUG; SCHRÖCK, 2002; LANG-WOJTASIK, SCHEUNPFLUG, 2005; ASBRAND, SCHEUNPFLUG, 2006). Global Education in this sense is a pedagogical concept defined by topics referring to global contexts, development, environment, migration and peace, and dealing with them according to the ideal of worldwide justice. Beyond its definition through topics, Global Education is characterised by the spatial perspective, i.e. by taking into account the global, regional and local contexts, and by the social perspective, i.e. by aiming at allowing learners to acquire competencies for living in a world society (SCHEUNPFLUG; SCHRÖCK, 2002). Concepts of Global Education discussed in the German discourse have in common a consideration of global challenges and problems which humanity has to face at the beginning of the 21st century. Global environmental problems, the gap between poor and rich, and coexistence in a multicultural and pluralistic world society are considered the motives for pedagogical efforts (SCHEUNPFLUG; SCHRÖCK, 2002, p. 6). The approach of Scheunpflug et al. in particular shows that Global Education aims at developing competencies for life in a globalised world, i.e. for dealing with the uncertainty of knowledge and the

insecurity of the future as well as with social and cultural disparities. This also comprises acquiring complex and differentiated knowledge about the world as well as basic social and personal competencies.

## CASE STUDY

This paper aims at pointing out to what extent the learning culture of a student company contributes to the realization of objectives of Global Education. It focuses on the group of female students, *Mango*, volunteering in the World Shop run as a student company.

World Shops are part of the Fair Trade chain, besides producer organizations in developing countries, Fair Trade organizations, labelling organizations and other retailers than World Shops (i.e. supermarkets). Traditionally, the Fair Trade movement is based in the development movement and very often supported by churches. Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect. It aims at achieving greater justice in international trade and supports small farmers and craftsmen in developing countries not only by a fair price that covers the costs of production and enables socially-just and environmentally-sound production, but also through direct and long-term trade relationships, campaigning and advocacy work. Beneficiaries of Fair Trade in developing countries are economically disadvantaged or marginalized producers and workers, who are mostly organized in cooperatives or other networks. Fair Trade aims to support them in terms of market access, independence and development. Within the Fair Trade chain, World Shops are specialised retailers for fair traded products like coffee, tea, chocolate, bananas and a wide range of handicrafts. Particularly in Germany, World Shops are often run by volunteers who are also involved in activities of campaigning and awareness, raising on issues of development aid and trade policy.<sup>2</sup> Due to this volunteering in World Shops is considered to be an opportunity for learning and involvement of adolescents too, and it becomes more and more popular to establish student-run World Shops in schools as a pedagogically-intended project.

The members of the group *Mango*, 18 or 19 years old, attended the 13<sup>th</sup> grade and were in their last year at school. Besides working for the extra-curricular project of the student company, they also dealt with Fair Trade-related topics in their religious education lessons when talking about the subject of ‘social justice’. The student company, which has a shop and

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<sup>2</sup> The website of the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO) provides detailed information about Fair Trade: <http://www.wfto.com>

arranges sales at school on a regular basis, is run and organised by a group of volunteer students in collaboration with several teachers. The teachers who accompany the project integrate the work at the student company at different times in their foreign language, business, arts, and religious education classes. The learning culture of the particular school is characterised among other things by the educational concept of the student company. In this context, the student company is important both as an extra-curricular project and because issues which occur in its work setting are integrated into different school lessons.

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Discussions were also held with two other groups of students of the same school. The first was composed of *male* students also in the 13<sup>th</sup> grade who were not participating in the student company, but who learned about Fair Trade in their religious education lessons and also informally due to the visibility of the student company's activities in everyday life at that school. The second was a group of full-time female vocational school students who were involved in the student company too, particularly selling products. In contrast to gymnasium students, their participation was not voluntary but required as part of the curriculum. In Germany, the "Berufsschule" (vocational school) is normally attended twice a week during a two, three, or three and a half year-apprenticeship with other days spent working at a company; this is referred to as dual system in vocational training. There are also students enrolled full-time at vocational school, usually low-performing students who did not succeed in getting a placement in the dual system of vocational training. Furthermore, group discussions were held with students from other grammar schools without a comparable student company and young people volunteering outside school.

Comparative analysis of different groups of adolescents shows the specific characteristics of the learning arrangements as enforced by the student company World Shop. Comparison and contrast bring out the respective orientations of specific groups and also their commonalities, allowing for the development of a theory about the process of knowledge genesis on an empirical basis (BOHNSACK, 2007, p. 64). The comparative analysis brings to light the particular characteristics of a case in contrast to other cases, contrast in commonness being the principle of the development of a typology (BOHNSACK, 2007). The aim of the comparative analysis is to place these cases within a complex, multidimensional typology. Nevertheless the orientations, typical of particular fundamental experiences, can best be brought out by describing exemplary cases. Thus, in the following description, the

documentary interpretation of the group discussion with the group *Mango*, i.e. the gymnasium female students who volunteered in the extra-curricular project, is the centre of attention. However it should be pointed out that the reconstruction of the young women's implicit patterns of orientation, i.e. the reconstruction of learning processes, is a result of the comparative analysis of different empirical cases, which cannot be described in great detail in the following.

## THE PRACTICE IN THE STUDENT COMPANY

Members of the group *Mango* who volunteered in the World Shop describe mainly management, organisation and planning activities when they talk about their involvement in the student company. They do not describe the simple activities the group has to deal with, but the tasks that require acceptance of responsibility and expertise. Their general orientation can thus be described as *habitus of the managers*. The young women present themselves as the 'bosses' of the student company. They consider themselves to be the ones who keep the business going.

Following Bohnsack et al. (1995), the young women's practice can be described as '*actionism*' of young people. It is of crucial importance for the members of *Mango* that the activity of managing a company is part of a shared practice with peers. For these adolescents, the practice shared with others is important while the objectives and intentions of the activity are of secondary importance. Young people's 'actionism' depends on the situation, its outcome is not known, and its function is to establish common ground in the peer milieu (BOHNSACK, et al. 1995; SCHÄFFER, 1996; NOHL; BOHNSACK 2003; BOHNSACK 2004). This can be seen in the following excerpt from the discussion of the group *Mango*<sup>3</sup>:

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<sup>3</sup> In the transcription M stands for male and F for female adolescents. A question mark indicates that the speaker could not be identified. Underlining indicates emphasis by the speaker, bold formation indicates loud speaking, brackets stand for short breaks (in seconds). In the original German discussion, the students use informal dialect, which cannot and need not be reproduced in the English version.



**Y:** Well, why have you joined the student company? In your spare time? (2)

**Cf:** Well, actually we asked ourselves this question quite often, but we didn't really find an answer. (2) Well, in the beginning, it was just for fun, and I don't know, it was simply something new. And there were such a lot of working groups offered at school and we had been very curious, we were new at the school and the main thing was to join one of these working groups. Well, first we decided to check out the World Shop and then, one by one we all joined, and afterwards it became sort of part of us. Everywhere and all the time we were talking about the World Shop, which products to order, how to organise this and that; well, that is just the way it was. And little by little, we noticed that the whole matter is valuable, something worth getting involved in instead of watching TV.

The reasons for joining the student company are to get to know new things at a new school and to spend time together with other young people. It is important to have fun; the objectives ("the whole matter is valuable") in the sense of instrumental-rational action mattered only later, as a pleasant side effect.

When comparing this group with the other groups of students, it is striking that the members of *Mango* do not express the *distance from school* that could be observed with the other groups of students. In the discourse of the group *Mango*, the student company, which is part of the school, is rather revealed as a conjunctive experiential space and as a social context which is relevant in terms of peer-culture. Furthermore, in contrast to other groups of students, the teachers act as partners and competent colleagues. When the group *Mango* describes the school milieu, the adolescents depict the World Shop explicitly as part of the school:

**Af:** Well, yes, we are a school organisation, we are a student company of our school, that is, well, ... that students run the business (...) Yes and that they themselves are responsible for organising all the business processes and for the management. So, the students have to do it on their own.

**Cf:** Yes, and the students who are involved in it, well, the purpose of it is that they begin to learn a bit about the problems of third world countries or also the problems of trade, what to think of exploitation and so on (.) and you are automatically forced to think about that when you work at the World Shop. And there are brochures everywhere and things like that and, well, when we are bored, we can read them or it is dealt with in the lessons, how these things are traded and why there is something like Fair Trade at all. (2)

Members of group *Mango* present the World Shop as part of the school by describing the pedagogical aims that the school and the teachers respectively pursue with the project of a student company. The adolescents explain the pedagogical conception of student companies: students are to run a business under their own responsibility and, by doing so, acquire key competencies. Furthermore, by running a student company that is oriented

towards sustainability, students are supposed to look into issues of development aid policy. Here, it can be observed that the school hierarchies change. There is no clear-cut difference between students and teachers anymore and the interaction within the institution school changes. Students reflect on the intentions of pedagogical measures which are aimed at them. By doing this, they place themselves on the same hierarchical level as the teachers. Obviously, the students adopt the hierarchies and roles within the organisation of the student company. There, the students, not the teachers, are the bosses. In the capacity of managers, they know about the aims of the organisation and explain them as part of the description of the company. This also applies when pedagogical aims are the object of the description and the organisation is a student company.

In this discourse, the work at the World Shop is seen within the pedagogical framework of the school and how the students of *Mango* experience school. It is remarkable that they do not draw a distinction between the peer milieu of the student company and the general conditions of the institution, or rather, the part of the school that is structured by the teachers. Referring to her experiences gained by working at the World Shop, Cf rather describes the ‘functional learning’ (TREML, 2000, p. 67) taking place in this practice. When bored, they read the information available on the leaflets in the World Shop, and thus they benefit from learning effects which were not intended. Cf describes the very pedagogical concept of the student company, which intends to introduce the students “incidentally” to the topic. Thus, in the orientation of the group *Mango*, working at the World Shop does not only mean having fun with the peer group, but it also has beneficial effects on learning at school. At the same time, Cf also mentions the lessons dealing with the topic. Thus, the World Shop is once again seen within the context of the school. Cf describes the acquisition of knowledge as a process which takes place when knowledge is imparted in school lessons. The functional learning in the student company described above is explicitly complemented by instructional processes of imparting and acquiring knowledge in school lessons.

Later in the group discussion, the functional learning is once again described by referring to the other students of the school (and of all schools of the town where the group *Mango* lives). The World Shop again is depicted as part of the school, that is to say, as a normal part of the life at school in which all students participate:

*Af: Yes and I believe that our school or perhaps all the schools here in X-Town, that the students know more about the problems than at other schools due to the fact that there is a World Shop run by students. Because, in fact, I think, most students*

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*know what it is and many are told about it by the teachers at school. (.) I also think that this instruction is more useful than anything else.*

*Cf: We are also represented at all the festivities, at the moment, we have got a stand at the Christmas market of our school. Then, well,(.) we also catered for the audience when there was a theatre play on at the town hall, we served juices and our chocolates. And once a week, there is a small sales stall where they sell our chocolate bars or other sweets that students can buy.*

*Af: Well, I think, in the meantime, most people know about us and most of them come into contact with the topic and probably begin to think about it a bit. (1)*

In her proposition, Af describes functional learning; in this case, it is the learning of her fellow students in everyday life at school: most students come into contact with global issues due to the existence of the World Shop, and they know what it is about. In further discourse, Cf sets out what it means to come in contact with the World Shop in everyday life at school. She illustrates her point using examples of the practice. Af concludes by assuming that the natural contact with the topic, due to the presence of the World Shop in everyday life at school, may provide her fellow students with some food for thought.

But the main point of Af's proposition is that students are aware of 'it' because of the presence of the World Shop *and* because they 'are told about it by the teachers at school'. In Af's opinion, it is this combination of functional learning as a fundamental experience (in the sense of Mannheim's conjunctive experiential space) and formal instruction in lessons that is 'more useful than anything else'. *Here, the adolescents describe a special school milieu, in which Fair Trade is self-evident.* Learning through 'coming into contact' is described as a fundamental imparting and acquiring process within a shared experiential space, as Schäffer puts it (2003, p. 26). The school milieu depicted by the adolescents is framed by the combination of the conjunctive practice in the peer-milieu of the World Shop student company and the instructional milieu of the particular school, which focuses, among other things, on economics education.

## **ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE**

Due to a specific school culture formed by the teachers who accompany the student company, the existence of Fair Trade is a matter of fact in the school milieu of the group *Mango*. Different opportunities at school offer access to knowledge about the world. In the orientation of the group *Mango*, knowledge about the world is knowledge which they have acquired at school. In addition, as with other groups of students, individuals that these

students get to know personally, and who can report on the situation in developing countries authentically, are important sources of learning.

In the following excerpt of the group discussion, when directly asked about access to knowledge, students answered that they not only learned from school lessons and other academic opportunities like lectures, but also from the work at the student company:

*Af: Well, when we buy the products, we learn a lot because there are a lot of brochures and so on, where it is explained. Because, for example, we have goods produced by the X-company, well, I think it was us who bought them? (.) well, then you also get (nice) information leaflets, where you can find everything, for example how it is produced, who produces it and what exactly, so that you can provide the clients with information and yes- ( )*  
(...)

*Af: Yes or from the catalogues, because most often it says where the goods are produced and in what cooperatives and so on. (...)*

*Cf: Well you get advice from everywhere at school, actually it's omnipresent at school actually. (2) That there is always something going on and always somebody who tells about it. (3)*

Of course, the activities of the student company enable group members to have access to information. Knowledge about the world is imparted in the practice of the student company as specific knowledge about the origin of the products and the conditions under which these things are produced in developing countries. The adolescents describe how they get information when they choose products for their range of goods at the student company. This description shows the adolescents' competency to gather information on their own at any time. The availability of information and access to various sources are characteristics of the school milieu of the group *Mango* – and here again in the combination of the student company World Shop and instruction. Information is gathered both in practice and in school lessons. The important point is: *For the group Mango, the access to information about the world is self-evident and part of the fundamental experience in the school culture.*

This can especially be seen when comparing and contrasting the group with students who encountered global issues only in their school lessons. The group *Mango* and the other students have in common that the authentic experience of speakers, fellow students or friends is considered to guarantee the reliability of the information. The members of the group *Mango* share the habitus of grammar school students, for whom the acquisition of knowledge is of crucial importance. In the discourse of the group *Mango* – in contrast to other groups of students - the authenticity of the informants is neither subject to critical analysis nor was its importance especially emphasised. The implicitness and the extent of the knowledge

which the adolescents of the group *Mango* have obviously reduced the mistrust of information which is conveyed by the media or communicated in lectures. This information is complemented by further information and it is constantly available. The correctness of information is fairly reliable because the adolescents of the group *Mango* obviously consider themselves to have opportunities and competencies to gain different information from various sources and thus knowledge about the world.

## THE ABILITY TO ACT

The uncertainty of the future, the complexity of consequences of action, and the contingency of knowledge turn out to be difficult circumstances in which to act in a complex world society. The empirical analysis of adolescents' world views has shown that the ability to act under conditions of uncertainty depends upon different strategies of reducing complexity (ASBRAND, 2008; 2009).

In the case of the group *Mango*, the adolescents' voluntary commitment to Fair Trade shows their ability to act in a complex world society. But in contrast to the other groups that volunteer in organisations outside school, the students' ability to act does not result from the orientation of an objectivist world view in the sense of a meta-story. Rather the *Mango* members share the reflexive approach to global issues with other groups of grammar school students. With the groups of students involved in non-school related activities who were questioned for this research, political ability to act is based on their orientation to knowledge that they consider secure, true and seemingly objectively correct. The downside of this security, on the other hand, is a barely differentiated, narrow idea of the world and the exclusion of the diversity of perspectives and of the plurality of positions – a basic principle of democratic culture.

Compared with the instrumental orientation of the group of *young men*, who are sceptical about the options of action of Fair Trade or about development aid and who describe themselves as being passive, the young women's ability to act in a world society can be explained in relation to gender. Uncertainty that arises from the insecurity of the future does not result in passivity and scepticism with the young women of the group *Mango*. The female students rather express an optimistic view explicitly against the background of an uncertain future:

*Af: ... and I think that later, that it is really like that, (.) that perhaps we can really make a bit of a contribution toward social justice and then it cannot be that everybody (.) gets such a lot of money or that there is so much for everyone. And that's why I don't think that I will gain as much money or that so many people who want to can gain money because there is not enough for everyone. (.) So everybody has to be satisfied with a bit less. (3) Because the poor want something, too. (4) (...)*

*Cf: ... I hope that our generation is, I don't know, cleverer than the present generation. I don't know whether you can say it like that, but if they begin to think about what they do and what the consequences of their actions are. (...) But if I show them how to do something, well that they think about it, about how they can help and help effectively and how their help can have positive effects. I hope that it will be like that. (.) But I can't exactly know. (5)*

The young women of the group *Mango* encounter the complexity of the world society and global issues by applying constructive and complex solutions to the problems. They do think that it is possible to bring about a bit more justice, but they do not hold this opinion with certainty – in fact they reflect uncertainty (“I hope that it will be like that. But I can't exactly know”). The young women consider it possible to support development and they suggest a concrete option to act, i.e., to create general just conditions for world trade in terms of a global social market economy. But they do not anticipate the outcome of the development; the success of the options to act mentioned above remains uncertain. In contrast to the young men's orientation investigated in the research, which can be qualified as *instrumental and sceptical*, the young women are orientated toward action. Their orientation can be described as constructive in the way they deal with complexity, process-oriented and not dependent on the purpose; it is an optimistic view connected with activity. For the young women, it is reasonable to act even if the success cannot be foreseen, but is uncertain. This constructive orientation is based on the fundamental experience of the situational practice with other adolescents, which is justified beyond functional rationality. For the members of the group *Mango*, the common practice with the other adolescents at the student company World Shop *has its end in itself*.

## **A COMPLEX WORLD VIEW**

In the orientation of the group *Mango*, the comprehension of the connections between the Global North and Global South is characterised by an explicit emphasis on the autonomy and capacity of the people in developing countries. Within the far-reaching topic of globalisation and development, the practice of real persons – in developing countries as well as in industrialised countries of the North - is picked out as a central theme. The description of



living conditions in developing countries by the members of *Mango* distinguishes between different circumstances within these countries – in contrast to the stereotypical representation described in the discourses of other groups of students. In contrast to the inequality implied by the model of development aid, the group members of *Mango* present people in developing countries not only as passive recipients of this aid, but as active and autonomous. The adolescents of the group *Mango* construct a political model of action on a worldwide scale based upon principles of justice. The orientation of the group *Mango* expresses the ideas of equality of all people and confidence in the capacity of people in developing countries to change their situation on their own. The development model of the group *Mango*, based on the market economy, seems to be the result of the experience of partnership with people in developing countries gained in the practice of Fair Trade.

The Fair Trade practice opens up a shared experiential space with people in developing countries, which, in terms of space, is global. Members of *Mango* have a practice of trade in common, with smallholders and craftsmen who produce goods sold in the school's World Shop. Thus, *Mango* members experience themselves as part of an international network linked by the common practice of trade. In this worldwide conjunctive experiential space with global impact, where people in developing countries are considered to be partners at the same level, a complex world view emerges from the common activity with partners in other countries. The same happens to groups of adolescents involved in international youth organisations with comparable experiences.

## CONCLUSIONS: THE LEARNING CULTURE OF THE STUDENT COMPANY

On the whole, the learning of *Mango* members, the groups of grammar school students who work in a World Shop run as a student company, can be described as successful with regard to the objectives of Global Education. What then characterises the learning arrangement 'student company' compared to formal lessons and youth work outside school?

(1) Inasmuch as Global Education aims at constructing a complex world view, this is supported by the shared *experience in a global dimension* with partners in the practice of the Fair Trade movement, the experience of *a worldwide conjunctive experiential space* in terms of Mannheim (1980).

(2) Empirical analysis reveals the potential of 'actionism' in the peer milieu for informal and functional learning processes, respectively. A practice that can be described as

'actionism' of young people (BOHNSACK et al., 1995; SCHÄFFER 1996; BOHNSACK; NOHL 2003; BOHNSACK 2004) is justified by itself. Considered to be beyond functional rationality, it is process-oriented and constitutes a peer milieu. This kind of practice, with unpredictable effects, is an experiential space within which fundamental processes of acquiring and imparting knowledge (SCHÄFFER, 2003) can take place.

Through the practice of the student company, adolescents can mingle with peers inside school. It is fun and it is associated with a positive attitude toward school and toward the teachers, creating a relationship that is not considered hierarchical but equal between partners (NENTWIG-GESEMANN; STREBLOW; BOHNSACK, 2005). In this respect, the student company provides the young people with possibilities of participation. Students are required to assume responsibility for a practice characterised by seriousness and – in contrast to many other so-called action-oriented projects – takes place in real life and beyond school. Because they experience self-impact, it is also beneficial to self-esteem (SCHWARZER; JERUSALEM, 2002; NENTWIG-GESEMANN; STREBLOW; BOHNSACK, 2005).

The example of a World Shop student company shows that this activity, which connects business actions with the commitment to worldwide justice, is obviously of relevance to society at the beginning of the 21st century. It shows that the possibility of assuming responsibility motivates students to participate wholeheartedly in such an *occupation* (Dewey) and to learn. Furthermore, this example illustrates that a learning culture cannot be equated with arbitrariness and is not – as learning that takes place outside school - unintentional and unplanned but requires carefully structured and pedagogically-justified action of teachers. The project of a student company which enables students to participate, to acquire competencies and experience self-efficacy, is initiated by teachers accompany the work of the student company pedagogically. They successfully face the task of supporting students' self-organised work and learning processes as advisers, moderators and mentors. The student company, as a pedagogical activity of the school, is initiated by teachers setting up a situation that Trembl calls '*extensional education*': the pedagogically intended, intentional setting up of situations in which functional learning takes place (TREML, 2000, p.74).

Nentwig-Gesemann, Streblow and Bohnsack (2005, p. 88) point out that a student company has the potential to connect constructive peer interaction at school. This is typically associated with having fun, with expectations concerning the role of a student at odds with institutionalised learning at school. Findings presented in this paper lead to the assumption



that a student company productively combines the potentials of informal learning in the peer milieu, also found in youth work outside school, with systematic instruction at school.

Empirical youth research (YOUNISS et al., 2002; DÜX; SASS 2005) describes informal learning that contributes to adolescents' acquisition of knowledge as specific to youth work outside school. Empirical analysis of the learning culture of a student company shows that this statement has to be differentiated: It is not a certain *place* where learning occurs (school vs. youth work outside school) that is an essential element but a certain *quality of the learning culture*. The latter is characterised by opening up space for informal learning in the peer milieu, by conceding scope for development and design to students although these learning environments are structured and accompanied by adults.

This paper's findings show that informal learning that is motivated and determined by youth-specific interaction, and by bonds of friendship in the peer milieu existing *inside school and connected with systematic instruction*, can help address the deficiencies of youth work outside school (ASBRAND, 2009). Learning at school provides adolescents with the possibility of acquiring personal and social competencies, but also expert knowledge about the world and ways of cognitively dealing with such topics. Consequently, they learn to recognise and respect a diversity of positions and about the perspectivity of world views.

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